DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 181 465 CS 205 362

AUTHOR Kaiser, Marjorie M.
TITLE The Meaning of Work in Literature Popular With Sixteen and Seventeen-Year Olds.
PUB DATE Nov 79
NOTE 16p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the National Council of Teachers of English (69th, San Francisco, CA, November 22-24, 1979)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Adolescent Literature; Booklists; *Career Awareness; Career Education; Employment; Language Arts; Literary Criticism; Literature; Novels; Reading Materials; Secondary Education; *Work Attitudes

ABSTRACT

This analysis of 22 of the 29 most popular books selected through the 1978 Books for Young Adults Poll shows the books to have considerable career content and largely to present characters with positive attitudes toward work. The 29 books are listed and the 22 career-oriented books are discussed in terms of the kinds of work represented in the books, the proportions of sexes and races represented among the principal characters, the number of characters presented in sexually or racially stereotyped roles, the age groups represented by the principal characters, the attitudes toward work expressed by the principal characters, what the principal characters chiefly value in their work, the attitudes toward occupational choice expressed by the principal characters, and the extent to which the books uphold basic career education concepts. A table representing the reinforcement of career education concepts in the 22 books is included. (AEA)

****
* Reproductions supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made *
* from the original document. *
****

ED181465

"PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE THIS MATERIAL HAS BEEN GRANTED BY
Marjorie M. Kaiser

TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)."

U S DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH, EDUCATION & WELFARE
NATIONAL INSTITUTE OF EDUCATION

THIS DOCUMENT HAS BEEN REPRODUCED EXACTLY AS RECEIVED FROM THE PERSON OR ORGANIZATION ORIGINATING IT. POINTS OF VIEW OR OPINIONS STATED DO NOT NECESSARILY REPRESENT OFFICIAL NATIONAL INSTITUTE OF EDUCATION POSITION OR POLICY

The Meaning of Work in Literature Popular With Sixteen and Seventeen-Year Olds

Marjorie M. Kaiser

> When you're young and looking for your first job you can't help but wonder where you're meant to go and what you're meant to do. When I told my friends that I'd be working at a cancer center most of them were skeptical, and I have to admit that, standing outside of the antiquated red brick building on a bitterly cold January day, I began to doubt the sanity of this decision myself. I didn't know then that there was a lot to be learned inside those walls, important things like love, and care, and, above all else, faith. Those same walls were to hold many surprises, a lot of laughter, and a quality of living I'd never have thought possible. (Please Remember Me, p. 3)

> Vets often wonder after a patient's recovery just how much credit they might take. Maybe it would have got better without treatment -- it happened sometimes; it was difficult to be sure. But when you know without a shadow of a doubt that, even without doing anything clever, you have pulled an animal back from the brink of death into the living, breathing world, it is a satisfaction which lingers, flowing like balm over the discomforts and frustrations of veterinary practice, making everything right. (All Things Wise and Wonderful, pp. 69-70)

> People remark that I smile a lot. Well, I think I've got a lot to smile about. Baseball means the world to me. It's my chance to make a legitimate living; it helps me respect who and what I am; it's my means of washing my past out of everyone's mind. I've tried to stay cool. I've tried not to become big-headed just because I'm a ballplayer. I've tried to treat baseball as a job just like any other job. (One in a Million: The Ron LeFlore Story, pp. 196-7)

Such are some of the thoughts and feelings about work of three characters in contemporary books popular with teen-age readers this year. Are these thoughts and feelings representative of other characters in other literature that students read? Many teachers engage students actively in career exploration

CS205362

through literature, but whether they do or not, students are indirectly picking up values, information, and attitudes from what they read.

As an English educator and one committed to the integration of career education and English, I have for some time been interested in how much career content is available in the literature that English teachers use or could use in secondary English classrooms. Content analysis research has been done investigating career content in what students are asked to read at both the elementary and secondary levels. These studies examine both text materials, such as elementary readers and literature anthologies, and teacher-selected literature for parallel reading (trade books) and generally concern themselves with the manifest work content and especially occupational stereotyping.[1] At the secondary level no attention has been paid to an examination of the career content in the literature that is selected by students for their own independent reading, not career books as such. What are the models secondary readers are presented with in this literature? How are characters employed and how do they feel about their work? What work values are apparent in this literature?

We know from considerable research in reading interests that careers are one area of interest to adolescent readers from grade eight or nine on and that adolescent readers tend to prefer books with characters their own ages or in the young adult stage of life (a stage when most individuals are embarking on at least their first careers).[2] But we do not know precisely which elements of the literature that students read independently and enjoy satisfy this interest or what effects these elements have on the reader. Further, we do not know the extent and nature of the career content that is available in the books that adolescents select and like most. Without extensive case study research, we cannot answer the first two questions. By examining a sample of books popular with adolescents and selected by them, we can begin to answer the third.

Annually, G. Robert Carlsen and the University of Iowa Books for Young Adults Program report their findings on older adolescents' reading choices from among three-hundred new books published each year. Typically, the books fall into several genres and include both adult books and books written specifically for adolescents. Juniors and seniors in individualized reading classes in both rural and urban high schools in Iowa read and react to the books. Ultimately, the research team compiles a list of the most popular books, usually thirty to thirty-five titles. Carlsen and his team derive certain generalized categories for the types of books older adolescents seem to be interested in each year, and from comparing these annual published lists from year to year, teachers can develop some feeling for contemporary adolescent reading interests and how they change.[3]

The interest categories into which the twenty-nine most popular 1978 books fall are seven: (1) Rites of Passage (from adolescence to adulthood), (2) Adventure and Suspense, (3) Science Fiction, (4) Sports, (5) Personal Experience, (6) Historical Fiction and Romance, and (7) Humor.[4] Here, then are the titles selected as the most popular books with sixteen and seventeen-year olds in 1978:

Books For Young Adults Poll (1978)

* Archer, Jeffrey. Shall We Tell the President? Fawcett-Crest, 1977.
* Banks, Lynne Reid. My Darling Villain. Harper and Row, 1977.
* Beckman, Gunnel. That Early Spring. Viking, 1977.
Bennett, Jay. The Birthday Murderer. Delacorte, 1977.
* Bower, George. November . . . December. Bantam, 1977.
* Brady, Mari. Please Remember Me. Archway, 1977.
* Brancato, Robin. Winning. Bantam, 1977.
Colman, Hila. Sometimes I Don't Love My Mother. Morrow, 1977.
* Crawford, Charles. Letter Perfect. Dutton, 1977.
* Day, Robert. The Last Cattle Drive. Avon, 1977.
* Forbes, Colin. Avalanche Express. Dutton, 1977.
* Gedge, Pauline. Child of the Morning. Popular Library, 1977.
Hayes, Billy. Midnight Express. Popular Library, 1977.
* Herriot, James. All Things Wise and Wonderful. Bantam, 1977.

* Hinkemeyer, Michael. The Fields of Eden. Pocket Books, 1977.
Hoffman, Alice. Property Of. Fawcett-Crest, 1974.
* Hunt, Irene. William. Scribners, 1977.
* King, Stephen. The Shining. Signet, 1977.
* Klein, Norma. It's OK If You Don't Love Me. Fawcett-Crest, 1977.
Lawrence, Louise. Sing and Scatter Daisies. Harper and Row, 1977.
* LeFlore, Ron with Jim Hawkins. One in a Million: The Ron LeFlore Story. Warner Books, 1978.
* LeGuin, Ursula. Very Far Away From Anywhere Else. Bantam, 1976.
* McCullough, Colleen. The Thornbirds. Harper and Row, 1977.
* Plimpton, George. One More July: A Football Dialogue with Bill Curry. Harper and Row, 1977.
Poortvliet, Rien and Wil Huygen. Gnomes. Harry N. Abrams, 1977.
* Smith, Martin Cruz. Nightwing. Jove-Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1977.
* Tofte, Arthur. Survival Planet. Bobbs-Merrill, 1977.
* Trevor, Elleston. The Theta Syndrome. Fawcett-Crest, 1977.
Williams, Mona. The Messenger. Signet, 1977.

* - career content

This list of twenty-nine books contains nine adult novels, thirteen young adult novels, five adult or young adult biographies, one work of historical fiction, and one satirical reference book. As I read and analyzed these twenty-nine popular books, I was seeking answers to several basic questions. My answers to these questions structure the remainder of this article.

How many of these books show the work of the principal character or narrator or present work as significant background to the action? First, I decided to eliminate from the analysis Poortvliet and Huygen's beautifully illustrated and expensive satirical reference book, Gnomes. It is indeed a delightful "scientific" compendium on gnomes and other beings from folklore -- their life styles, their legends, their habits and habitats. While a very strong work ethic pervades this account of the wise little creatures, the book is too frivolous to consider in the same light as the other twenty-eight.

← Of these twenty-eight books, twenty-two show the work of the principal character or narrator or present it as significant background to the action.

These titles are marked with an asterisk on the list of books. In order for work to be considered as a significant part of the book, the principal character or narrator must be actually engaged in his or her work, or preparation for work or career-decision making must be a major focus in the book. In either case, a student reading the book, though he or she might not read it for this reason, could not fail to sense the importance of work to the book. Twenty-two books, then, contain career content. The remaining six books focus on other aspects of family relationships, psychological problems, mystery, or personal-social issues not related to work. In half the twenty-two books, work is shown as essential to both theme and characterization while in the other half, work seems only to have some bearing on theme and/or characterization.

What kinds of work are represented in these books that do show work or present it as significant background? The occupations or professions of the principal characters or narrators are all both realistic and lawful positions: a rancher, a doctor, a CIA agent, a sheriff, a hotel caretaker, a farmer, a home-maker, an FBI agent, a deputy sheriff, a veterinarian, a professional football player, a recreation aide in a hospital, a professional baseball player, a jack-of-all-trades, a soldier and government leader, and seven students engaged in career decisions and preparation. With this limited number of occupations represented it may not be meaningful to classify the work by career cluster, but it is of interest to note the number of positions that bespeak a service orientation.

In what proportions are the sexes and races represented among the principal characters or narrators in the books with career content? Sixteen of the principal characters in these twenty-two books are male; six are female. While this proportion may seem unbalanced even for this limited

sample of books, it is fair to point out that in several of the books with male principal characters, major female characters are shown in a variety of occupational roles. Analysis of racial distribution in these twenty-two books reveals nineteen Caucasian characters, two Negro characters, and one Hopi Indian.

How many of the principal characters in these twenty-two books are presented in sexually or racially stereotyped roles? The sixteen male characters do hold positions traditionally held by males, from physician and vet to sheriff and deputy, from professional athletes to special agents. The six female characters, however, include one home-maker, one soldier and government leader, one recreation aide in a hospital, and three students contemplating and preparing for non-traditional occupational roles -- one as a music composer, one as a scientist, and one as a scientific technician.

If we look instead at the world created by the twenty-two books as a whole, females are represented in numbers and in a variety of occupational roles. As major characters we find ranch managers, accountants, special agents, an actress, doctors, nurses, and teachers. Few major characters are females in traditional dependent roles as mothers and home-makers though there are at least four books in which the reader finds these types as important characters though not major ones and several in which these types appear as minor characters. Several other home-maker-mothers are extremely independent workers in areas other than mothering and home-making and are characters crucial to the books' themes. Males, in general, are not found in non-traditional occupational roles in these books. Over-all, though male characters do dominate the books, there are numbers of strong female characters and many engaged in interesting and challenging work.

Caucasian characters clearly dominate the books. The two Negro characters

are in stereotyped occupational roles. One of them is a professional baseball player (One in a Million), while the other is a poor black boy growing up and learning independence on a farm (William). The Hopi Indian is a tribal deputy sheriff on a reservation, a somewhat unique role (Nightwing). The Caucasians include representatives of a wide variety of American ethnic groups as well as characters from England, Australia, Sweden, and Egypt, and they fill a variety of occupational roles.

Of the books showing work or presenting it as significant background, what age groups are represented by the principal characters? As pointed out earlier, adolescent readers tend to like works which feature characters their own ages or a bit older. What did readers find in these twenty-two books in terms of ages of the characters? Only one principal character is younger than any of the readers would have been, while seven are of secondary school age (thirteen-nineteen years of age). Eleven characters are in the young adult category (twenty-thirty-five years of age); two are middle-aged, and one is over fifty years of age. Two of the books cover nearly the entire life span of the principal character (Child of the Morning and The Thornbirds), though the bulk of each of these books focuses on the young adult years. While the elderly and the very young are not found as principal characters, they do help to populate the universe of these twenty-two books as a whole and not just in stereotyped roles. We see wise, active, and independent older people in several of the books (That Early Spring, All Things Wise and Wonderful, Child of the Morning, William, and Survival Planet). The very young are represented rather realistically in minor roles in a number of books.

What attitudes toward work are expressed by the principal characters of these twenty-two books? A character's attitude toward his or her work

can be expressed in dialogue, thoughts, actions, or by a narrator. Of the twenty-two principal characters portrayed in these books with career content, sixteen express very positive attitudes toward their individual work or toward work in general. James Herriot, the narrator and principal character of All Things Wise and Wonderful, expresses perhaps the most positive attitude toward work of any of the sixteen characters. In this book, as in the first two books in Herriot's series (All Creatures Great and Small and All Things Bright and Beautiful), readers come to know first-hand how the vet feels about his work with animals and his accompanying interactions with village people. Herriot's dedication and love for his work are highlighted in this book by the focus in alternate chapters on his unhappy experiences in the British Royal Air Force. In Robin Brancato's Winning, the reader suffers and rejoices vicariously as paralyzed Gary Madden, a high school football player struggles and develops a positive attitude toward work in his future life. English teacher Ann Treer, working with Gary and a co-principal character in the novel, demonstrates the power of a teacher's positive attitude toward her work and toward herself as a human being. Another three characters express a mild liking for their work, while only three are neutral, and none express disliking. In spite of some healthy self-questioning and self-evaluation in several of the books, over-all, the characters are committed to their work, work hard, and enjoy it. What students reading these books could not fail to see here is enthusiasm, dedication, and self-fulfillment.

What do the principal characters in these books seem to find as the chief value of their work? Of course a character may find multiple values in his or her work, but it is possible to select the value that seems most important to that character. In the twenty-two books with

career content, one character finds his co-workers to be the chief value; two characters find material gains to be the chief value; three characters seem to find the work environment of most value; seven value most the pride, prestige, or dignity deriving from the work, and nine seem to value most the service they are able to provide. Over-all the books present principal characters who see their work as much more than just a way to earn a living. Although there are a very few minor characters who find no value in work at all, taken together with all major and minor characters included, the books present a realistic variety in the kinds of satisfaction gained from work. Repeatedly, the reader meets major and minor characters who pursue work of all kinds for a variety of reasons with joy and commitment.

What attitudes toward the concept of occupational choice are expressed by the principal characters in these twenty-two books? Occupational choice refers to the concept that "every individual in a culture can find an occupation which is suited to him, which he is suited to, and in which he can achieve satisfaction of his basic needs."[5] We can observe a character's attitude toward this concept by his or her dialogue, thoughts, or actions or through the narration of the book. Of these twenty-two books, half of them present principal characters who affirm the possibility of occupational choice. One principal character affirms the possibility but accepts limitations; four characters negate the possibility of occupational choice, accepting the inevitable, fate, or destiny; six characters express no attitude at all.

The four books in which the concept of occupational choice is negated by the principal character are The Thornbirds, Child of the Morning, The Shining, and One More July. In two books the historical setting provides the very understandable attitude of the principal characters. McCullough's

The Thornbirds covers the life span of Meggie, the principal character, from 1911 through 1969 in Australia, and her situation of feeling trapped and at the mercy of the traditional expected role for women born and raised on ranches in those years is entirely realistic. In Pauline Gedge's Child of the Morning, Queen of Egypt circa 1500 B.C., Princess Hatshepsut, from an early age feels divinely destined to rule as pharoah and prepares herself for such ruling in every conceivable way. Her dedication and preparation are never a matter of choice.

The other two books present contemporary settings. In Stephen King's The Shining, the principal character is a young man recently fired from a teaching position who feels he is forced to take a winter job as a resort hotel caretaker simply to support his family. Bill Curry, the principal character of George Plimpton's biography, One More July, suggests throughout the book that a professional football player after once indicating an interest in pro ball is forever at the mercy of the managers and owners of teams as well as that of his own salary expectations. Peopling the world of these books collectively, of course, are major and minor characters expressing the range of attitudes on this concept, but over-all the books present readers with more positive attitudes about career options than negative ones.

Perhaps the most encouraging aspect of these findings is the fact that six of the seven principal characters who are of secondary school age affirm the possibility of occupational choice. These young characters, through their behavior and thoughts and dialogue, imply that with self-knowledge, careful exploration, and planning, one can be in control of his or her future and not be simply a victim of fate or circumstance. These adolescent characters can serve as realistic models for adolescent readers.

To what extent do these twenty-two books uphold ten basic career education concepts? One important purpose of career education programs has been to help students attain certain sub-concepts that relate to different aspects of the large concept. Some of these concepts can be attained only through literal experiences, but others might be attained indirectly through literature or other kinds of vicarious experience. The concepts selected for this analysis were culled from many career education curriculum materials.[6] The concepts were chosen as appropriate to the exploratory phase of career education programs; the list does not include concepts of a strictly informational nature, having to do with job classifications, salaries, and so forth, nor does it include concepts which can be attained only through actual work experience. The final list is made up of concepts relating to work in general, work values, and self-knowledge. The degree of reinforcement of the selected concepts can be seen in Table 1.

A cursory glance at Table 1 reveals a high degree of reinforcement of the selected concepts in the twenty-two books. In fact, this is true of the twenty-eight books as a whole, in part, because some of the concepts while identified as career education concepts are also general concepts which have a significance beyond career education. Nevertheless, the twenty-two books which do have career content tend to uphold most of the concepts. Those concepts which are not reinforced nearly unanimously, however, are # 7 and # 10, extremely critical ones. Perhaps the single most important aim of career education programs is to help students see and appreciate the connections between their education and their future work in life. Ten of the twenty-two books do not suggest either directly

Table 1

Reinforcement of Career Education Concepts in 22 Books

Career Education Concepts Typically Designated for Exploratory Phases of Career Education Programs and Which Could Be Gained Through Literature	Book Tends to Uphold or Reinforce the Concept	Book Tends to Ignore the Concept	Book Tends to Negate or Contradict the Concept
1. There is dignity in work.	21		1
2. Persons need to be recognized as having dignity and work.	22		
3. Society is dependent upon the work of many people.	21	1	
4. Work means different things to different people.	21	1	
5. An understanding and acceptance of self is important throughout life.	20	2	
6. Individuals differ in their interests, abilities, attitudes, and values.	22		
7. Education and work are inter-related.	12	7	3
8. The occupation one chooses affects his/her total life-style.	22		
9. Satisfying and rewarding work may bring self-fulfillment.	21	1	
10. Such factors as age, sex, race or religion no longer limit career possibilities.	14	6	2

or indirectly that there are such connections. Three negate the inter-relation altogether by presenting characters who come into their work by being in the right place at the right time. These characters also openly dismiss the value of their education and of education in general (One in a Million, Nightwing, and The Last Cattle Drive). Of course, work is sometimes obtained by chance, and in reality adult individuals abound whose work lives give no evidence of real connections with their education. A very positive aspect of this particular finding, however, is that once again six of the seven books with secondary school age students as principal characters do reinforce this concept. These characters, the age of the readers in Carlsen's poll, provide excellent models of young people taking their education seriously, looking for connections themselves between their present educational endeavors and their future more specialized education and/or careers.

Eight of the twenty-two books do not uphold concept # 10; six simply ignore the concept, but two negate it. In one case, The Thornbirds, in the attempt to draw a realistic historical representation of life in Australia in the first half of this century, presents male and female characters in extremely traditional occupational roles and relationships. Meggie's daughter, Justine, whose story concludes the novel in the late 1960's, however, is pursuing her own career as an actress, and the reader predicts many changes to come even if Meggie was not afforded these opportunities.

In The Theta Syndrome, the other book to negate concept # 10, a modern hospital provides the reader with several major and many minor characters involved in health science work. The single female medical researcher is in a coma by the end of the first chapter of the novel. From then on, all

professional personnel in control in the hospital -- physicians, psychiatrists, neuro-surgeons, psychologists, anesthesiologists, and even the police -- are male, while all nurses, aides, secretaries and other supportive personnel are female. Still fourteen of the twenty-two books do uphold this concept, and readers of these books, male or female, of any race or religion, would receive more positive impressions related to this concept than one might have predicted.

We can conclude from this analysis that the books selected through the 1978 Books for Young Adults Poll as most popular with older adolescent readers, not career books as such, have considerable career content and largely present characters with positive attitudes toward work. Whether this content and these attitudes are in fact among the reasons why students responded favorably to these books, we cannot know. We can, however, speculate that the emphasis on career education and career awareness in secondary schools in the last seven or eight years may have heightened student interest in careers and especially in the human dimension of work as it can be explored in depth through literature. It is no speculation to say that students are responding positively to books that involve them in the work, career preparation, and decision-making in the lives of characters. English teachers and all educators eager to see academic and career education more fully integrated can rejoice at this discovery. Perhaps we even deserve some of the credit. Certainly, we can try to capitalize on this good fortune in working with students in the future.

Footnotes

1 For a review of the types of analysis that have been done, see Marjorie M. Kaiser, Work Content and Attitudes Toward Work in Eighth Grade Literature Anthologies, unpublished dissertation, Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State University, 1976), Chapter 3.

2 Alan C. Purves and Richard Beach, Literature and the Reader: Research in Response to Literature, Reading Interests, and the Teaching of Literature (Urbana, Illinois: National Council of Teachers of English, 1972), 61-144.

3 Lists are introduced and presented each year in the January issue of English Journal.

4 G. Robert Carlsen, Elizabeth A. Belden, and Anne S. Harker, "1978 Books for Young Adults Poll," English Journal, LXVIII, 1 (January 1979), 56-59.

5 Anne Roe, The Psychology of Occupations (New York: John Wiley and Sons, Incorporated, 1956), 252.

6 Kaiser, Chapter 4.